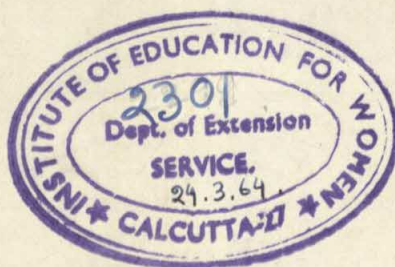


FOLK DANCES OF INDIA

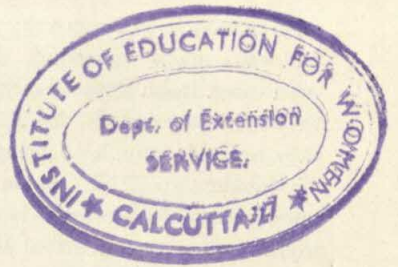


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INTRODUCTION

It is in the character of all folk art to be unselfconscious and spontaneous. As such it is the most direct expression of the innermost spirit of a people. Of nothing is this more true than of dancing, since the instinct for rhythm is as basic in human nature as the urge for ritual.

India, with its vast variety of races and conditions, has been a veritable treasure-house of dance-forms for untold centuries. Most of the prevailing systems of Indian classical dancing, which are governed by elaborate techniques and show a high degree of refinement, have had their origin in the dances of the common people, which still survive, in as virile a state as ever, in tribal hamlets and peasant huts. The Indian folk dance is simple without being naïve, for behind its simplicity lie both a profundity of conception and a directness of expression which are of great artistic value. The difference between folk dancing and classical dancing, of which the former is the mainspring, is largely one of attitude. There is no deliberate attempt at artistry in the folk dance. The very existence of the dance

is adequate justification for it, unless it be the pleasure of the dancers. No audience, in the usual sense of the term, is implied, and those who gather round to watch are as much a part of the collective self-expression as the dancers themselves. Moreover, the concept of 'portraying' emotion is, generally speaking, foreign to the folk dance inasmuch as what is expressed is natural and original. What is important is not the grace of the individual dancer or the virtuosity of the isolated pose, but the total effect of the overwhelming buoyancy of spirit, and the eloquent, effortless ease with which it is expressed. It is clear, therefore, that here the question of a cleavage between the entertainer and the entertained does not arise as in the more sophisticated classical dance-forms.

So closely are the folk dances of India woven into the lives of the people that they invariably derive their main inspiration from the movements associated with the performance of daily tasks. In some of these dances the operations connected with sowing, harvesting, and hunting

seem to have been given a rhythmic pattern and thus made beautiful. Peasant children often learn these dances long before they go to work in the fields, so that when they are old enough to bring their share of labour to the community, each movement they perform is familiar and joyful. The young tribal lad is not at a loss when he encounters a wild animal, since from his early childhood he has practised the hunter's dance, which is not merely a symbolic ritual, but is composed of movements actually needed to overpower dangerous beasts of the jungle. Such examples, which can be multiplied, illustrate the quality of the relationship between folk dance and the life of the people rather than the utility of the former.

The folk dances of India are rooted not only in the daily lives of the dancers, but also in the physical environment which, by and large, guides their development and provides, so to speak, a fitting stage for their performance. Nature, silently and unobtrusively, fashions these dances as she does the lives of the people who dance them. This fact accounts, at least in part, for the great variety for which India's folk dances are justly famed. As the dancers from the mountainous regions sway and bend, they recreate the vast, undulating ranges of the Himalayas. The agitated movements and abrupt changes of posture in the otherwise gentle rhythms of Manipuri dancing signify violent storms and the uprooting of trees. The tense and watchful attitudes in the dancing of the Nagas and the Gonds denote the known and unknown perils of the jungle. The dances of the fishermen of Saurashtra suggest the roaring, mounting waves of the sea, while the folk dances of the

plains, in contrast, impart a sense of peace and harmony which are indicative of the milder aspects of Nature.

The character of folk dancing varies with the climate and topography of each region, but the religious nature of its origin is shared by all dancing in India. Even the so-called social folk dances, which are usually associated with the passage of the seasons, or performed to celebrate the sowing or harvesting festivals, partake of the character of a ritual in some degree and are seldom wholly secular. The religious folk dances display a greater variety of mood than would ordinarily seem possible. First of all, there are the devotional themes in which the dancers are merely worshippers paying homage to the deity. In others, gods and goddesses are adored and entreated as though they were human beings of consequence, and liberation is sought from demons and evil spirits whom the people cannot master on their own. Scenes from the scriptures and mythology are enacted in honour of various deities. The story of Krishna and Radha, and their eternal love, is the inspiration of innumerable dances all over the country. Such is the poignancy of this theme that, when adapted to local conditions, it tends to lose its religious character and acquires all the qualities of a romantic tale with contemporary relevance. On the other hand, martial and heroic dances, which are widely practised only among some aboriginal tribes, are not without an element of invocation to a deity.

It will thus be seen that there is a good deal of overlapping even in the three accepted broad categories of dances,

and that the inadequacy of classifying them into social, religious, and martial dances is a measure of the strength of India's tradition of looking at life as a whole.

It is interesting to note that those who led the movement for national renaissance during India's fight for freedom fully recognised the value of the country's folk art, although the latter, on account of its deep, pervasive roots, had not been subjected to as

great a harm as some of the urban arts. Modern India owes the rediscovery of Manipuri and Santhali folk dancing almost entirely to Tagore, who evolved a dance system of his own and taught it at Santiniketan. In Kerala, the poet Vallathol was seized with enthusiasm for the dances of his people, and with passionate energy set about reviving and systematising the *Kathakali* form. There is evidence of similar activity, in greater or lesser degree, in the other parts of the country, too.



ASSAM

Assam has a large and rich variety of folk dances which are an essential part of the day to day life of the people.

Five hundred years ago, Sri Shankardev was responsible for a great movement of religious and social reform in Assam based on Vaishnava teaching. He travelled widely and studied not only the prevailing religious systems but also the music and dances of the country. He was the founder of the famous Satras which are institutions where disciples gather round a Guru. Sri Sankardev studied the Kamrupa dance in the light of his newly acquired knowledge, and evolved the Satria system of dancing which is preserved and practised by Vaishnava teachers in the Satras to this day. The purpose of these dances was to invoke the deity, to heighten the devotion of the worshippers and to display the prowess of the divine Krishna.

The *Keli Gopal* (Krishna Lila) is a Satriya dance depicting episodes from the life of Krishna, who first appears as a child with his cowherd companions. The demon Bakasur then enters and threatens to devour him, whereupon Krishna engages him in a duel and kills him. Krishna and his companions dance in triumph which turns to delight as they are joined by a party of gopis (milkmaids). At this point another demon called Shankhasura makes his appearance and the dancers scatter in panic. Krishna goes into battle again and vanquishes the enemy as before. Then follows the climactic *Maha Ras Nritya*, in which the gopis retire and

the ten Avatars of Lord Krishna are depicted.

The *Bihu* is a secular dance connected with the seasonal festival of the same name. On the last day of Chaitra, which corresponds roughly to the 15th April, gifts are exchanged after the harvesting and there is a great deal of singing and dancing. Boys and girls enjoy great freedom on the occasion of the *Bihu* festival and dance together in the open fields late into the night.

Shillong, the capital of Assam, lies in the heart of Khasiland. The Khasis have mongoloid features and are among the most attractive of India's tribal peoples. Khasi dancing is rigid and stiff in posture and the test of good dancing is the exact synchronisation of the footwork and the beat of the drum. The gestures of the hand closely follow the rhythm of the feet. Although the Khasis live in a matriarchal system, the women are not permitted to lift their eyes during the dance.

Some of the most picturesque and vigorous of India's dances come from the Naga people who inhabit the borderland between Assam and North Burma. The Nagas are divided into several tribes and each tribe has its characteristic dances. The best known among them are the war dances which have been preserved in the original form. The Naga dancers with their war paint, headgear of horns or feathers, home-made necklaces of stone or horns, and shining brass armlets present an imposing spectacle.

The spear dance is common to all the Nagas. Long spears are brandished overhead and hurled at invisible enemies, and rapidly thrust at the dancer's own



A dance of the Boros, Assam

limbs while he successfully manoeuvres to escape the attack of his own weapons.

The Zemi Nagas have a set of distinctive dances which imitate the movement of animals. The dance of the bee and the dance of the hornbill, a rare bird prized for its plumage by the Naga warriors, are notable examples.

The women of the Kabui Nagas perform a dance which is composed of a series of abstract movements. They begin the dance sitting down while their hands and arms move in machine-like gestures to make geometric patterns. As they rise to a standing position they take a step forward and resoundingly beat the back of the thigh with the other foot, thus producing the effect of a rapidly beaten drum.

The Zemi tribe lives in the North

Cachar Hills. Though bearing the general appellation of Naga, they are quite distinct from the Nagas of the hills. Mainly animists with agriculture as their chief occupation, they have a vast repertory of folk dances, of which the *Khamba Lim* and the *Nruira Lim* are the most popular.

At the beginning of the harvest season, the *Khamba Lim* is performed by two groups of dancers—male and female—who stand in two rows. In the course of the dance they change their positions, but the rows are never broken.

The *Nruira Lim*, or the cock-fight dance, is performed by groups of boys and girls who stand opposite each other and stage a mock fight. This dance has no particular significance and is performed when everyone is in a happy mood.



A Mao Naga dance, Manipur

The Boro people are predominant among the tribes of the plains of Assam, and have a great variety of dance and music.

Mainly engaged in agriculture, they dance at festivals connected with cultivation. They are worshippers of Siva and Sakti.

The *Habajanai*, *Baisakhu*, *Bihu* and *Nat Puja* are some of their well-known dances.

The *Habajanai* is performed after the celebration of weddings, and the *Baisakhu* and *Bihu* during festivals of the same names. The *Nat Puja*, performed with

a sword in both hands, is an invocation to the supreme deity, Siva, who assures victory to his devotees in times of war.

The Kuki Nagas have a dance in which four long bamboo poles are placed across one another. The square thus formed is opened and closed with the beat of the drums by men who sit near the ends of the poles. The dancer hops on one foot outside the cross when it is closed and inside when it is open. The dance becomes more intricate when two or more people dance together in the bamboo pole pattern and the tempo of the accompanying drum increases.

MANIPUR

Manipur is the home of one of the four main schools of classical Indian dancing, and is essentially a land of dancers. It is obligatory on every woman in Manipur to dance. Dancing is optional for men, yet most of them dance, for dancing is an integral part of life in Manipur. The famous Manipuri *Ras* has developed out of the delightful folk dances of Manipur.

Legend has it that Siva and Parvati were jointly responsible for a *Lila* and left their abode in the Himalayas in search of a place in which to dance it. Siva looked down from the hills that surround Manipur and saw a beautiful valley

submerged in water. He struck his *trishul* against the mountains. The water drained out, leaving a vast and beautiful stage which is known today as Manipur. The origin of the *pung* (drum) and the *pena* (a small stringed instrument) is also ascribed to Siva and Parvati, and their *Lila* is the *Lai Harauba* dance of Manipur.

Scientific investigation, however, reveals that the *Lai Harauba* is of pre-Hindu origin and recalls the animistic phase in the evolution of the people of Manipur.

The *Lai Harauba* is dedicated to the village gods, of which there are a large number in Manipur. The Maibas (priests) and Maibis (priestesses) play a prominent part in the *Lai Harauba*, which is partly



Lai Harauba from Manipur

ritual and partly entertainment. It symbolises the creation of the world and of human beings. The creation of the human form is depicted through the symbolism of bees in contact with flowers, and the dance reaches its climax when the divine spirit enters the dancers, who then dance in pairs as lovers, as man and wife, to enact the story of the immortal love of Khamba and Thoibi.

The *Lai Harauba* has retained its popular folk character through the ages and is the most ancient dance form of Manipur. Its importance lies in the fact that all Manipuri dancing is directly or indirectly derived from it.

The Manipuris are not only good dancers but also superb singers. Vaishnavism is widely practised and Sri Chaitanya's teachings are a live tradition in Manipur. The *Kirtan* is the most popular form of music, and as the fervour of the singing increases, the singers and musicians stand up one by one and dance to the music, either separately or in pairs. The *Kirtan* has produced two of Manipur's most interesting dances, namely, the *Pung Cholon* and the *Kartal Cholon*. *Cholon* literally means 'fast movement' and in this case refers to the movements of the bodies of the drummer and the *kartal* (cymbals) player during the *Kirtan* when they are intoxicated with their own music. The accompanying instruments are used with advantage to create certain effects during these intricate dances.

The *Rakhal* or the dance of the cowherds is generally performed in the open fields in Spring by gaily dressed young boys who enact episodes from the boyhood of Krishna.

The *Thabal Chongbi* is a merry social

dance performed during the festival of Holi. The literal meaning of *Thabal Chongbi* is "jumping in the moonlight", and this is a dance in which everyone can join without regard to caste or status. This dance is a great attraction at Holi because on this occasion boys and girls can stay out as late as they like.

The *Ras Lila*, although of comparatively recent origin (about 1700 A.D.), is so stylised and systematised that it has acquired the character of a classical art form. Maharaja Joy Singh, later known as Bhagya Chandra, is said to have visualised it in a vivid dream, in which he heard the music, and saw clearly and in detail the movements and the costumes of the dancers. He called upon his daughter, who was well versed in the art of dancing, to perform the *Ras Lila* as he had dreamed it.

There are several types of *Ras Lila*. The *Basant Ras* is performed at full moon in March-April. The keynote of the story is the essential understanding between Radha and Krishna but it comes after painful experience. Hurt and infuriated by Krishna's faithlessness, Radha refuses to accept him at first. He implores her forgiveness saying, 'I fall prostrate at your feet; without you and your love I cannot live', and, after much pleading, the repentant Krishna succeeds in appeasing Radha.

The *Kunj Ras* is lighter in spirit and is performed during Dussehra. It represents the daily life of Radha and Krishna who are conceived of as ideal lovers. Here there is no separation; they amuse themselves and are happy in each other's company.

The *Maha Ras* is performed at the full moon in December and depicts the separation of the divine lovers. Krishna

abandons Radha, she threatens to kill herself, and finally Krishna returns to her.

In addition to these, there are other *Ras Lilas*, too. The *Nitya Ras*, for instance, may be performed on any day of the year. The *Diva Ras* may be performed only during the day time. In the *Natna Ras*, eight gopis sport with Krishna. The *Ashta-Gopi-Ashta-Shyam Ras* is performed during Spring and, as the name indicates, has a cast of eight gopis and eight Krishnas.

The traditional *Ras Lila* costume is highly decorative, and rich in colour and brilliance. The accompanying music is skilfully varied to avoid monotony.

Instrumental music accompanies all passages of pure dancing, and two women singers periodically relieve the performers from singing so that they can gesticulate more freely.

The women singers generally sing the arias of Radha while a male chorus singer recites Krishna's arias. The *Ras Lila* can be broken up into six main phases or parts as follows :—

1. Krishna appears and dances ;
2. Radha appears and dances ;
3. Krishna and Radha dance together. This constitutes the *Ras Lila* proper ;
4. *Bhangi*, the argument, when either Radha or Krishna refuses to join in the dancing, and the subsequent persuasion ;
5. *Milan* or the union of Radha and Krishna, when they joyously dance with the gopis ;
6. Prayer, when Radha and the gopis pledge their eternal devotion to Krishna.

Although the Manipuri *Ras* is essentially a play of emotions, the spectacle it presents has great aesthetic qualities.

The basic movements in Manipuri dancing consist of turns and half-turns.

In the *khurumba* or salutation, both the wrists are placed together and rotated twice. This movement punctuates each phase of the dance. The *chakra* or spinning is another hand movement in which the fingers open out and curl in towards the body. It is noteworthy that the *lasya bhava* predominates in the hand movements in Manipuri dancing while the *tandav* or vigorous aspect is depicted mainly through foot work.

To watch Manipuri dancing, with its ease of movement and supple grace, is an experience of rare beauty and enjoyment.

BENGAL

The folk dances of Bengal suffered a temporary eclipse during British rule and, until a few decades ago, a large number of educated Bengalis believed that Bengal had no dances of its own. Santiniketan was situated in the midst of the Santhal area and Gurudev Tagore discovered for India Santhal and Manipuri folk dances, and thus indirectly made Bengal conscious of its rich heritage of folk art. With the Bratachari movement initiated by the late Guru Saday Dutt, Bengal's folk dances became popular with the youth in Bengal.

The *Kirtan* is the most widely practised of Bengal's folk dances, although it is of ancient origin and dates back to the time when Chaitanya first propagated his Vaishnava cult. The *Kirtan* is essentially a community dance in which all can join without regard to caste, status, or age. The dance is very simple and is performed to the accompaniment of the khol or drum. The devotees move in a circle and raise or lower their hands with the beat of the drum. The music is appropriate to the deep religious and poetic appeal of the



Kirtan performance from Bengal

beautifully composed songs. With the singing the dancing also rises to a crescendo of emotional fervour. Sometimes the *Kirtan* party goes through the streets singing and dancing. This kind of dancing is called *Nagar Kirtan*.

Singing is a popular form of entertainment in the countryside. *Baul* songs are gay and the dancing performed with these songs, though only as an accompaniment, creates an atmosphere of joyous abandon. The ektara (an instrument with a single string) supplies the music. The *Baul* dance is not associated with any particular religious ceremony or festival. It can be performed at any place and at any time. There are wandering minstrels who readily perform the *Baul* for a small consideration.

Bengal has a form of dance-drama called *Jatra* with a tradition over 400 years old.

The *Jatra* is performed by travelling troupes and the dancing is accompanied by a good deal of singing in the manner of the opera. A *Jatra* troupe is trained and managed by a professional who is called the *adhikari*. The themes are usually derived from the *Krishna Lila* although during the movement for freedom a large number of *Jatras* with patriotic themes were composed and performed. There are *Jatras* with sociological themes also.

The district of Maldah has its characteristic style of dancing and singing, and the songs sung are mainly *Gambhira* songs. The themes used are varied and range from religious subjects to events of everyday life in the village. Current social or political problems also occasionally supply the inspiration for *Gambhira* songs and

the accompanying dancing.

In certain parts of Bengal, some war dances, remnants of an ancient past, still survive among the depressed classes.

The Bauris and Domes of Burdwan and Birbhum districts perform *Raibeshe* which is the most manly dance of Bengal. The dhol and the kansi supply the musical accompaniment. The dancers wear nupurs (anklets with bells) on the right foot. They utter wild war cries as the dance gathers momentum, and their movements and gestures suggest drawing the bow, hurling the spear, brandishing the dao, and so on.

The *Kathi* dance is unique for its rhythmic footwork and for the remarkable synchronisation in the beating of the sticks which the dancers hold in their hands. The performers move in a circle and break up to form various patterns but never miss a beat or slacken the rhythm. One of the dancers throws himself into the centre of the circle and continues to dance round and round, beating time with his feet and the sticks. The dancer in the centre of the circle is supposed to be the victim of the tribe's wrath.

BIHAR

The Santhals inhabit the hilly and forest clad plateau of Chhotanagpur in Bihar and spread out to the border districts of Bengal in the East and Orissa in the South. They are an artistic people and live an organised tribal life which abounds in folk lore. They have beautiful pastoral dances representing the picking of indigo, the reaping of grain and the preparation for the hunt. They also have dances with lighter and humorous themes such as the quarrels of co-wives, and so on.

On full-moon nights the young men beat a big drum, inviting the girls to dance. The girls then assemble, decked with flowers in Spring and feathers in Winter. While the men play the drum and sing, the girls link arms in twos and form a long line which moves forwards and backwards, the head and the body swaying in perfect unison to the beat of the drum. When the dancing is over, the boys and girls meet and talk happily together.

Kumar Bijoy Pratap, the Santhali prince of Seraikela, stylised some of these folk forms which came to be known as *Chhow* (mask) dances. Some regard the *Chhow* dances as the fifth major school of Indian dancing, the other four being the *Kathak*, the *Manipuri*, the *Bharat Natyam* and the *Kathakali*.

The *Chhow* dances are usually performed during the Spring festival. The art of making masks is a highly specialised one and is handed down from father to son through a guild of skilled craftsmen.

The flowing lines and striking colours of the mask create in the spectator the very mood the dancers aim at evoking. The mask is so made as to allow freedom of movement to head and neck, but there is no scope for the use of the eye as a mode of expression. As masks are used, the success of the dance depends entirely on the skill of the dancers, and not on their physical charm.

The *Chhow* dances portray not only mythological stories but also historical events and the day to day life of the people.

The *Jata Jatin* is the dance of Mithila women and is generally performed on moonlit nights during the monsoons. Grown up girls and young housewives assemble in a courtyard and, accompanied

by a drum, dance from midnight to dawn. As they dance they enact in gestures the epic story of the love of Jata and Jatin. The most dramatic episode of the dance concerns a wicked boatman who breaks through the dancing ring and kidnaps the beautiful Jatin. The lovers undergo many trials and tribulations but all ends well and, as happens in most folk tales, they live happily ever after.

The Hos are a tribal people who inhabit the Chhotanagpur plateau and practise agriculture. In language and custom, they are closely related to the Mundas. They are great lovers of freedom and of Nature. Their joys and sorrows, more particularly the former, find a prominent place in their songs and

dances, thus making their festivals gay and attractive.

The *Maghe* is a ritualistic dance performed to evoke Dasauli, a deity who dwells in *sal* groves. It is auspicious for every village to have these groves in the neighbourhood, for they are believed to be *Jaira*, or the abode of Dasauli. This deity is propitiated in order to secure the protection of life, property and cattle. The Ho people also seek the blessings of the gods, Nage-era, Hundi-era and Manges, to ensure that they may have plenty of water and safe hunting.

There are a number of dances associated with the Ba festival held in Spring when the people decorate their houses with



A dance of the Ho tribe, Bihar

fresh flowers and the dancing and singing continues for three days.

During sowing time, the Hero festival is celebrated. On this occasion a ceremonial dance is performed to the accompaniment of songs which seek the blessings of Dasauli for an early and bountiful crop.

When the harvesting is over, the people sing and dance to celebrate the *Jomnama* festival.

Apart from these, there are dances meant for festive occasions such as marriages.

The dances of the Oraon people are generally determined by the seasons. In Spring they perform the *Jadur* dance. 'Jadur' means Spring in the Oraon dialect. A drummer plays on the madal which produces a sound suggestive of the roar of the ocean. The feet of the dancers move as if to describe the undulation of the waves in the sea. The girls with their hands interlocked stand in a row, hop two steps forward and return with their bodies bent forward. Then they take two steps to the left and repeat the first movement. The men, beating on their drums and uttering loud cries, jump towards the women. When the women move forward the men retreat in the same tempo. The *Jadur* dance is one of the oldest dances among the Oraons.

The summer dance of the Oraons is known as *Sarhul*. Men and women stand in two or more rows and sing and dance together. There is no instrumental accompaniment. The singing starts with a preliminary cry of *Ho! Ho! Ho!* which gradually rises to a high pitch. Then the song begins and the people lined up in rows start dancing. The *Sarhul* is

more or less a martial dance. The song ends with a sharp and loud sound of hurrah, the dancers jump and stamp on the ground three times and the performance comes to an end.

The songs and dances of the rainy season are known as *Karama*. The girls are surrounded by boys while another group provides the musical accompaniment. The *Karama* has an element of sadness in it and this is enhanced by the slow movement of the bent bodies and the halting beat of the drums. The girls hop like birds after every one and a half steps, bend low and, lifting one leg, return to their original positions with the other leg. The boys surrounding them sing and with clapping hands jump towards the girls. Those playing on the instruments also advance towards the girls but return bending gracefully. Both the boys and the girls carry sticks on their shoulders during the dance.

When the rains are over and the sky is clear it is time to sing the *Matha*. The *Lujhri* and *Jhumar* are variations of the *Matha*. The forward movements in this dance are short and jerky but the step back is slow and graceful.

UTTAR PRADESH

Bounded in the North by the Himalayas the main body of this fertile land consists of the Indo-Gangetic plain. The *Kathak*, one of the four classical dance styles in India, is the contribution of Uttar Pradesh. There is evidence to show that this historic region once had a large and abundant variety of folk dances which gradually lost their hold on the culture of the rural community through feudal influences. These dances now

survive precariously among a small section of the people.

The ancient Braj Bhoomi, with Mathura and Brindaban as its centre, is associated with the Krishna-Radha-Gopika cult, celebrated in numerous folk songs and dances all over India. Naturally enough, the most popular dances of this region are the *Ras Lila* series which depict the boyhood and early manhood of Krishna, his frolics with the gopis and his passionate love for Radha. The movements are complex, the miming full of artistry and the music joyous. Much of the footwork resembles that of the *Kathak* but is far less stylised.

During the Holi or Dol-Jatra festivals there is a great deal of dancing among the women of the Braj districts. The dances performed on these occasions reflect the light-hearted spirit of these festivals during which coloured water or red and yellow powder is sprinkled in good fun and every one sings, dances and makes merry.

The *Nautanki*, though traditional, is still a popular folk form of this region. It is a type of dance drama with a commentary of songs rendered in the operatic manner. The melodies accompanying the songs as well as the dances are derived from forms familiar to the people. The themes are either based on the struggle between the forces of good and evil from the religious epics or on heroic deeds from historic traditions. Often the *Nautanki* players deal with the day to day problems of social life, or with patriotic themes such as the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh. The *Nautanki* is still performed by professional folk troupes but its original vitality and artistry has suffered con-

siderably on account of unassimilated and ruinous modern influences, exercised primarily through the cinema. The *Nautanki*, as it is now danced, is not even a ghost of its former self. Meant primarily for the amusement of the poorer sections of the townspeople, it only corrupts them. Bereft of its pristine folk character, it has become a vehicle of vulgarity. The playing of the nagara is the only vestige left of the original *Nautanki* and to its detriment the harmonium and the tabla have now been added.

With the onset of the monsoon the *Kajri* season begins, bringing with it much beauty and joy. The cool showers from the East bring relief from the terrible summer heat. The *Jhula* (swing) songs, which the village women sing with much abandon during the rainy season, express vividly the ecstasy of this relief. While one group swings high and low, another merrily dancing on the freshly sprinkled earth sings of the vast fields springing to new life, of the grass which daily becomes greener, and of corn fields which grow taller with every shower.

Under Muslim influence on the one hand and that of Brahmanical puritanism on the other, dancing fell into such disrepute that it survived only among people of the low castes. There are some dance forms in Uttar Pradesh which are peculiar to certain communities and are not performed by others.

The dance of the Ahirs is an example worthy of note as Krishna himself is said to have been born among the Ahirs. The dance is performed in the Ahir community on the festive occasion of a birth or a marriage and is accompanied by a dholak and kansi (cymbals). The dancers wear tight shorts studded all over with



A Diwali dance of Ahirs from Uttar Pradesh

ghunghrus (little bells) and a girdle of ghunghrus about the waist. The bare body is adorned with armlets and necklaces. The beauty of the intricate footwork is heightened by the jingling of the ghunghrus.

The lusty *Kaharawa* tune is associated with the caste of Kahars, and their typical dances, which are a delight to watch, are based on it. The singing is in chorus, with a leading voice, and is accompanied by a set of drums and kartals. Kahar dancing is both vigorous and expressive, and the whirling movements become faster as the dancing reaches its climax. Unfortunately, however, obscene movements are frequently superimposed on what is inherently a healthy dance form to make the watching crowd laugh.

The dances of the Chamars (leather workers or shoemakers) are set in comic opera style. The theme of the dance is usually legendary and religious but the content is unorthodox enough to leave

plenty of scope for buffoonery and clowning which is done with great agility and gusto.

This clowning is characteristic of the dances of the oppressed communities. It often takes the form of social satire directed at their oppressors and serves as an effective defence mechanism against social injustice.

Community dancing languished in the plains but continued to flourish in the Himalayan hill districts. The *Jhora* is a Kumaon dance in which men and women of all castes join. Linking arms they dance in a circle with simple steps. A very large number of dancers perform the *Jhora* and as this mass of people moves, sometimes standing, sometimes bending, sometimes sitting down, the vast scene of the unending Himalayan ranges, which constitute the background to these dances, seems to be recreated.

The *Chhapeli* is the dance of lovers and is performed by couples holding a mirror



Chhapeli dance from the Kumaon Hills

in one hand and a colourful handkerchief in the other.

The *Jagar* is a dance which only a few people are competent to perform as it deals with trances and evil spirits. The dance is believed to have the power to rid the community of epidemics and other misfortunes.

The small polyandrous community of the Jaunsars, living on the borders of Garhwal and Himāchal Pradesh, have preserved a wealth of folk dances. The *Thali* is the graceful dance of their women. The *Jadda* and *Jhainta* are festive dances

in which men and women dance together with abandon. The *Thora*, in which men dance to the accompaniment of big nagaras, holding swords in their hands, is a remnant of their early war dances.

PUNJAB

The *Bhangra*, with its manly movements, is the most popular folk dance of the Punjab peasantry. Instinct with spontaneous hilarity, it is a favourite on all festive occasions. The *Bhangra* is a simple community dance in which anyone can join at any time. The dancers move in a circle so that in the course of the dance as many people as wish can join without interrupting the dance. The drummer stands in the centre of the circle with the drum hanging round his neck and periodically gives the signal to the dancers to raise their tempo of movement. Behind the drummer stand two or three people who lead the dance. The leaders are not professional dancers, but ordinary members of the community to whom gestures come more easily than to others. In the *Bhangra*, there are no hard and fast rules. The dance just goes on, the dancers swirling round, feet in step, clapping, waving their lathis and exclaiming *hoi! hoi! up, up!* to heighten the joyful abandon of the dance.

At intervals, there are pauses in the dancing and a *Dholla* or a *Boli* (traditional folk songs of the Punjab) is recited, after which the dancing is resumed.

The men dress in their best for the dancing. A brightly coloured silken patka (head-gear), a lachcha (loin cloth or lungi) of matching colour, a long white Punjabi kurta, and a black waistcoat studded with shining white buttons complete the



Bhangra, with its vigorous and manly movements, is the most popular folk dance of the Punjab peasantry. Instinct with spontaneous hilarity, it is a favourite on festive occasions





Pangi is a charming folk dance from Himachal Pradesh. It is not connected with any particular festival and is usually performed for the sheer pleasure of it



The Maria people of Madhya Pradesh have a large variety of dances, most of which are connected with the seasons



The Boro people from the plains of Assam are worshippers of Siva and Sakti. Mainly engaged in agriculture, they dance at festivals connected with cultivation



Thabal Chongbi is a merry social dance of Manipur and is performed during the festival of Holi. The name of the dance literally means 'jumping in the moonlight'



Yakshagana is performed in Karnataka and is the perfect example of a simple dance-drama designed for rural entertainment

outfit. In addition, they wear ghunghrus on the ankles.

During the *Bhangra* season, which starts with the sowing of wheat, the young men of the village collect in some open field every full moon and dance and sing to the beat of a drum till they are tired. The *Bhangra* season concludes with the Baisakhi festival when the golden wheat is harvested and the granaries are full.

The *Bhangra* can rightly be called the national community dance of the men-folk of the Punjab. Of the same status is the *Giddha*, a dance of the Punjabi women. It is an ancient ring dance,

with simple and graceful movements which are as pleasing to the eye as the accompanying music is to the ear. The following lines from a song express something of its importance in the lives of the womenfolk :

‘ Enter our village, too, O Giddha dance !
O do not move away by the outer path.’

In the mountain valley of Kulu live the descendants of the early Aryans and Scythians. Though representing various stages of social development, the inhabitants of the Kulu valley have an organised community life and have preserved their folk dances in a pure form.



Giddha of the Punjab

In the Kulu valley there is an unbroken series of fairs from mid-May to mid-October. The main purpose of these fairs is to propitiate the local gods. Feasts are held for priests and the worshippers dance to their hearts' content.

About the middle of May, when the wheat and the barley crop is ready for the scythe, the festivity begins and, attended by musicians, the decorated idol is carried out of the temple to the village green. People from the surrounding villages gather together dressed in their best and decked with flowers. They form a ring round the idol and begin the dance which becomes faster and wilder as it gathers momentum. A fresh group is always ready to replace those who fall out exhausted. Richly attired women watch the dancing. In some villages the women form a separate ring and dance by

themselves. In the remoter regions of the valley the women join their menfolk and dance in the same ring.

There are other occasions when the gods are invoked. If a farmer wants to ensure that his crop will be bountiful he summons the devout to his field where the idol is brought and traditional dancing is held as at the fair.

The minor village festivals culminate in the great festival of Dussehra when an imposing parade of devotees is held in the ancient capital of Sultanpur in honour of the greatest of all gods Raghunath, the presiding deity of the whole of the Kulu valley.

For three days, the assembled people dance various folk dances in the soft moonlight till they can dance no more and fall asleep on the village green



A dance from Chamba, Himachal Pradesh



Rajasthani Dandia Ras

surrounded by their gods and with only the sky for a roof.

HIMACHAL PRADESH

Community dancing during Dussehra is widespread throughout Himachal Pradesh. Dancing, however, is not confined to religious festivals and seasonal celebrations alone. In Chamba and the higher regions, the people dance for the sheer pleasure of it. They have lovely, delicate pastoral dances. It is interesting to note here that an unknown troupe of Gaddies (shepherds) won the National Trophy in the Folk Dance Festival of

1954. The simple Gaddi women, who had never left their villages before, swept the board with their superb grace, matchless team work and perfect synchronisation.

RAJASTHAN

Rajasthan is well known for its rich tradition of folk culture. It is to be expected, therefore, that it should be equally rich in the variety and beauty of its folk dances.

The *Jhumar* or the *Ghumar* is the most popular dance of Rajasthan. It is performed with great abandon by women on

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ceremonial occasions like Gangore, Diwali, and Holi. Colourful and gay, the *Jhumar* consists of simple, graceful movements.

The *Gindad* is a popular community dance in the Sekhawati region of Eastern Rajasthan. A fortnight before Holi, people of all castes and creeds join and dance together. A large platform or manch is erected for the drummer in every mohalla and people dressed in attractive colours flock together with sticks in hand to dance. They then march away to dance in the neighbouring mohallas.

During Ganesh Chaturthi boys and girls of all castes dance together as they follow the procession with bizarre masks on and sticks in their hands.

Rajasthan has developed a variety of dance-drama known as the *Khayal* which has an unbroken tradition of 400 years. *Khayals* are generally performed by professional folk troupes and provide entertainment for the remotest villages.

In the feudal atmosphere of medieval times, community dancing was looked at askance with the result that talented dancers broke away from their respective castes and gradually built up a community of their own known as the Bhawai. Tradition has it that 400 years ago a celebrated folk dancer called Nagoji Jat founded the Bhawai community. The chief characteristic of the Bhawai dances is the remarkable speed and variety of movement. The Bhawais are taught the art of dancing from their early childhood and soon acquire professional efficiency. The women do not dance, their roles being played by boys. Theirs is essentially a folk technique and the dance-dramas are usually devoid of any religious sentiment. The themes are based on the daily life of the village community

or on the epic love of Dhola and Maru, or on traditional historic incidents. Though sometimes verging on the obscene, these dances contain much humour.

The Bhawai dancers set out on an eight months' tour after the rainy season. They travel far to their Yajmans (patrons) to perform, and thus earn a living for themselves.

Marwar is famous for its *Kathputli* (puppet) dances. The Kathputliwalla manipulates the dolls while his wife plays the dholak (drum) and sings out the story. The show takes place at night and goes on for about two hours. The Rajasthani Kathputliwallas go as far out as Assam and return after they have earned enough for the year.

In the remotest part of the Thar desert lives the sturdy tribe of Sidh Jats. They are followers of Guru Gorakhnath and are famous for their yogic feats. A huge fire is lit, big drums and pipes play the music, a song is sung, and a dance is performed to this accompaniment. A group of Sidh Jats jump into the fire and dance merrily in the most normal manner for an hour or so. This fire dance takes place in March-April during a mela (fair) held in memory of Guru Jasnath.

The Bhils living in the hilly regions have numerous community dances, some of which are reminiscent of their old war dances while others are festive. The *Ghumar*, in which men and women dance together in a circle, is a festive dance performed on the occasion of marriages and festivals. During the Holi festival, men, with sticks in hand, perform the *Ger*, a vigorous and forceful dance. The ceremonial *Ghumra* has features of both the *Ger* and the *Ghumar* and is by far the most fascinating Bhil dance.

A very large number of folk dances have been relegated to a down-trodden section of the people who now earn their livelihood doing odd jobs, singing, dancing and begging.

The chief occupation of the Bagrias is the making and selling of brooms. Holi is a big festival for them and on this occasion women go dancing *Bagria* from door to door while the men play the *chang*. The most remarkable feature

of *Bagria* dances is the variety and power of their rhythms.

The Karvelias (snake-charmers) are an artistic people. Their women sing and dance to earn a living and are sometimes joined by the men. Among their favourite dances are the *Shankaria* and *Panihari*. The first is performed by gaily dressed men and women who dance in a circle. The *Shankaria* is the enactment of the famous story of a young man who



A folk dance of the Bails, Madhya Bharat

loves a woman already in love with another. The *Panihari* is a dance based on a famous romantic song of the same name, and is performed by a couple.

The Kamads keep the records of the Bhumiya families and sing and dance for them. A Kamad troupe consists of two men and two women who generally come from the same family. The men sing and play on the *ektara* and the women, who have *majiras* tied all over their bodies in a particular manner, dance in unimaginable and difficult poses. Through gestures they depict actions such as cleaning, thrashing, cutting and removing the corn, kneading the flour, preparing chapatis, making ghee out of curds, spinning on the *charkha*, and winding the yarn.

MADHYA PRADESH

The Gonds are an ancient pre-Aryan tribe who inhabit the semi-hilly forest regions of south-east Vindhya Pradesh, north-east Madhya Pradesh and are also found in the frontier districts of Orissa and Andhra. Other minor tribes also live in these regions, but the folk culture of the Gonds is predominant.

The *Karma* is the chief dance of the Gonds. The women link arms and dance in straight lines forming rectangles and swaying rhythmically. The men form a separate circular ring, and dance vigorously, displaying their manly prowess. After a while some dancers climb on to the shoulders of others and this two-tier formation moves in perfect step, bodies swinging to the rhythm of the drum and the claps of the women. Subsequently the dancers alight from the shoulders of the other dancers, get inside the dancing circle, and start winding in and out as

if playing hide and seek. The drum beats faster and louder and the formations break up in an uproarious tumult.

The Gonds have also evolved several dance styles akin to the *Jhumar* dances. These are meant to accompany their love songs and other songs with social themes. The Gonds use stilts to cover long distances in a short time in their land of trackless jungles. From this tribal practice the Gond youth have evolved a unique stilt dance. Influenced by Hindu orthodoxy, a number of reform movements arose among the Gonds and these seem to have had a destructive effect on their dances. However, the social workers who opened ashrams in the region have tried to encourage and preserve the traditional folk culture of the Gonds and to use it as a medium for their improvement and enlightenment. Unfortunately, ignorant attempts to 'improve' and stylise their songs and dances according to preconceived ideas are still made and these are a menace to the purity and spontaneity of the Gond as of all tribal folk culture.

There are certain dances which are common to the tribal people of Bastar.

Their dances have no religious significance although Sakti and Danteshwari are the presiding deities during dance performances.

On the full-moon night of Bhadon, they perform the *Nava Rani* dance, and in Magh and Chaitra they dance the *Dewari* and the *Chait Danda* respectively.

When they sow seeds in the fields, they perform the *Beej Phutni* dance. When Sawan comes, it is time for the *Godo* dance. The *Goncha* dance is per-



A dance of the Maria tribe of Bastar, Madhya Pradesh

formed to appease the goddess of rain, and lasts the whole night.

The youth of these tribes perform the *Lakshmi Jagar* dance. An image of the goddess Lakshmi is placed under a shemal tree. Young men and women from distant villages come and dance the whole night and return to their villages at daybreak, only to assemble again in the night. This dance continues for a whole month. The girls adorn the image of the goddess with beautiful flowers which they pluck in the forest.

ORISSA

Orissa, like Assam, is rich in folk dances as there are a large number of tribes in the State. Those who have

distinctive dances are the Saorias, the Gadabas, the Juangs, the Khonds, the Gonds, the Baigas and the Murias. The Muria bison-horn wedding dance is one of the most picturesque folk dances in India.

The ruling house of Mayurbhanj patronises a type of *Chhow* dance, which is distinct from the *Chhow* dance of Seraikela. The traditional Mayurbhanj *Chhow* is a war dance of the Paikas (Oriya Kshatriya warriors). In January 1912 it was presented in a pageant held in Calcutta in honour of the Prince of Wales, and was a "great spectacle" according to the *Statesman*.

The Paikas also have dances in which they enact themes from the epics, giving them a popular twist. A troupe from



Chhow of Bihar

Mayurbhanj participated in the National Folk Dance Festival of 1954. In their vigorous and militant *Kiratarjun*, the Kirats do better than Arjun. In *Garudbahan*, Garud fights for equality with Vishnu and gives in only when he discovers the divine nature of his opponent. It is remarkable how the tribal people placed the equality of man even higher than the gods.

The *Maya Shavari* is a group dance. In Satyayug, during the churning of the ocean, Vishnu disguised as the enchantress Mohini tempted Mahadev. Parvati was naturally enraged, but bided her time till Dwapara, when she disguised herself as a Shavari and along with her companions set out to tempt Krishna. Krishna was charmed by her beauty and followed her to Mount Kailas.

Mahadev made a timely appearance at this moment and was about to slay Krishna when Parvati, now fully satisfied, intervened and explained how she had successfully avenged the humiliation of her husband. Krishna was put to shame and begged for his life. In this dance, the mightiest of the gods and goddesses are treated as ordinary human beings.

The Bhoomiyas of Mayurbhanj have a variety of dances. The *Karam* is performed on ekadasi day (eleventh night of the moon) in the month of Bhadon. *Karam* means fortune, and this festival is celebrated to propitiate Lord Siva in order that he may bestow a bounteous harvest on the people and grant them long and prosperous lives. A tree is brought from the forest and planted in the village, and an earthen pot filled



Jadur of Orissa

with a little earth placed under it. Paddy and other grain seeds, which are considered to be seeds of fortune, are then thrown into the pot. People who perform this ceremony fast on that day and dance all night. The *Mundari* dance is similar to the *Karam*, the only difference being the rhythm.

The Bhoomiyas perform the *Jadur* dance to propitiate Buru Bonga, a deity of the tribe. This festival is celebrated on the nearest hill where all the villagers gather and drink *Pachuvary*, a kind of beer brewed out of rice, at the same time offering it to the gods by pouring it on the earth. That side of the hill where the drink flows is considered to be good for cultivation. At the end of the ceremony, the villagers dance their way down the hill and return to their homes.

MADHYA BHARAT

The tribes of Madhya Bharat—Bhils, Banjaras and others—have a number

of colourful dances. The *Dagla* dance of the Bhils is performed by men for their amusement, while both men and women take part in the *Pali* dance.

The Banjaras perform the *Langi* dance in the month of Sawan and on Rakhi Poornima and Kali Amavasya. Songs of heroism, mostly about Prithviraj Chouhan, sung by the men accompany the dancing. In the *Ghero*, a group of men, with their hands on each other's shoulders, dance together. In the *Kamchino* six or eight men move in a circle, each dancer carrying another on his shoulders. On Holi day, after the sprinkling of colour in the morning, the Banjaras dance the *Phag* with swords in their hands. At least one of them dresses up as a woman, while some sit apart and provide the musical accompaniment.

The women do not, as a rule, join the men, but dance separately. The most popular dances of the Banjara

women are the *Lota* and the *Saundarya* dances.

The *Lota* dance, in which the women balance pitchers filled with water on their heads, is interesting to watch. In the *Saundarya* dance, they form two rows facing each other, and reach out and clasp hands, swinging back and forth and singing the while.

GUJERAT

The *Garba* is the best-known dance of Gujerat and is performed to the accompaniment of songs known by the same name. During the Navratri festival, a Garbi pot is ceremoniously planted in every house, attractive designs are cut out in the pot and a light placed within. Village girls, bearing their Garbis on their heads, go from house to house and led by the women of the house dance round the household Garbi. They are afterwards treated to sweets. The leader of the group sings the first line of the song while the rest repeat it in chorus, beating time by clapping hands in unison. At every step they gracefully bend side-

ways, the arms coming together in beautiful sweeping gestures, upwards and downwards and to either side, in order to clap.

Although linguistically and culturally Saurashtra is a part of Gujerat, it has remained backward owing to feudal rule. The relative isolation from modern influences has nevertheless helped to preserve the characteristic folk dances of the lower castes and the tribal people. Saurashtra has some unique dances which are peculiar to the working classes. The *Tippani*, for instance, is based on the labour theme and is performed by Koli women. During the construction of old-style houses, these women are employed to beat the floor into a permanent glaze. The *Tippani* dance is at once realistic and artistic. A group of Koli women with their *tippanis* (long sticks with a flat bottomed base and ghunghrus tied at the upper end) dance in a circle or a semi-circle, and with flawless, perfectly synchronised movements, level up the floor.

The *Ras* or *Krishna Lila* is performed in the *Garba* style, but men also



Tippani of Saurashtra

take part in it. In the *Dandiya Ras*, the dancers use sticks with ghunghrus tied to the ends. The *Garba* songs are of great antiquity and centre round the Radha Krishna myth. Of late, however, *Garbas* with modern themes are also being written and performed.

Most of the dance traditions in Saurashtra trace their origin to the time of Lord Krishna who is said to have ruled in Saurashtra for nearly a hundred years. There is hardly an art which does not bear the imprint of his colourful personality. While Usha, Krishna's daughter-in-law who came from Assam, popularised *Lasya Nritya* (*Garba*) in Saurashtra, it is Lord Krishna who gave the *Ras Nritya* to the people of Saurashtra.

Rural Saurashtra still preserves a rich treasure of folk music and dancing which has been handed down for generations.

MAHARASHTRA

The *Lezim* (small mallet) dance is rightly called the most important folk dance of Maharashtra. The group formations used are many and varied and there is hardly any dance technique in Maharashtra which is not used in this dance. There is stepping, hopping, squatting, and bending; and every movement is performed in perfect time with the strokes of the *lezim*, which is swung in four or eight counts, thus providing the rhythmic accompaniment. The *Lezim* dance is widely performed in schools as training in physical culture.

The crudest and most common is the *Dahikala* or the *Dahi handi* dance. It is performed on the day following Gokulashtami in memory of Krishna's favourite boyhood prank of stealing dahi (curds). This dance is performed among all castes

in Maharashtra, be they Chitpavan Brahmins or Thakurs.

After breaking a handi (small pitcher) full of dahi at the entrance of the village temple, the dancers go to various houses crying "Govinda!" The strongest of them stand in a row with their arms on each other's shoulders. Then some of the active lads climb up on to their shoulders thus forming a kind of pyramid. A young boy, impersonating Krishna, climbs up on the shoulders of the people in the second row and tries to reach the handi which is hung in every house on this occasion. As it breaks, there is a scramble to catch the broken pieces which are believed to have the power of increasing the milk supply. After this ceremony, the group marches off to the next house.

The *Nakta* is a humorous dance. The three performers are the Koli, the Kolin and the Nakta (snub-nose) who has a mask and a special dress. They step up and down the stage to the rhythm of the music, enacting the song which is being sung. The *Nakta* exaggerates every movement and makes humorous gestures. It is his special privilege to frighten the children by yelling 'boooo' periodically or by shooting an arrow at them which, however, never leaves the bow to which it is tied.

The *Kolyacha Nach* is the fisherman's dance, though the more modernised among them living in the neighbourhood of Bombay disown it.

The dancers stand side by side with Nakhavi, the captain, and Kolin, his wife, in the middle. The Kolin places her left hand on the hip and holding a kerchief in the right swings to either side and the feet separate and come together accordingly. The Nakhavi holds a glass



Dandiya Ras, Bombay

in one hand and a bottle of liquor in the other and pours it out periodically offering some to the Kolin each time.

The fishermen stand in two rows, and holding miniature oars in their hands and moving in perfect unison imitate the rowing of a boat. As their bodies sway forwards and backwards, they create, in the most realistic fashion, the illusion of a boat tossing on the waves of the sea.

The *Dasavatar* or *Bohada* is the folk ballet of Maharashtra and is performed on an improvised stage. The Sutraddhar first summons Ganapati and Saraswati and then all the ten incarnations of Vishnu in any order. Precedence is naturally given to the deity who happens to be the local favourite. The battle between Rama and Ravana, and the stories of Hiranya Kasipu and Nrisimha also provide themes which are treated with vigour and take the form of long drawn out dance-dramas.

The *Tamasha* is the folk opera of Maharashtra. Its original purpose was to keep the armies amused and entertained and to rouse the martial spirit in them. With the advent of British rule it degenerated into mere vulgarity and was shunned for its lewdness and obscenity. However, attempts are being made to revitalise it and to make it a fit vehicle for progressive themes with a popular appeal.

The *Phungadi* is the most popular dance among the girls of Maharashtra, to whatever class they may belong. It is a kind of game and is generally played by two, but more can join in if there is room. The girls stand facing each other, cross their arms and join palms and leaning back with their feet together and their arms outstretched they whirl round as far as and as long as they can and then part exhausted.

There are many kinds of *Phungadi* with slight variations. In one, instead of joining palms, the girls hold each other by the arm. In another, one stands while the other squats. In a third, one keeps only one foot on the ground, the other being placed on the opposite thigh, while the other girl stands. The *Phungadi* is good fun, good exercise and a merry dance which is practised as part of physical culture in many girls' schools.

DECCAN

The various regions of the Deccan peninsula are rich in folk dance styles. The dances of the semi-nomadic Banjaras are a feast for the eyes. Every woman is expected to dance as she is expected to work. If she cannot, she is not considered eligible for marriage. The *Banjara* dances are simple but charming, and are

inspired by the movements associated with daily tasks like harvesting, planting, sowing and so on. The costumes, embroidered with glass beads and shining discs, are picturesque and a great deal of ornate jewellery is worn.

In the tribal highlands of northern Hyderabad live the Gonds. For two weeks or so after Dussehra, all work stops and the Gond villagers are possessed by the festive spirit. Bands of dancers dressed in their best exchange visits with other villages and are received as honoured guests wherever they go. The youth, followed by musicians, come first at a fast pace, while the old men are the last to arrive. Then they all dance together, moving in anti-clockwise fashion, holding sticks which they strike against one another to keep time. These are *Dandaria* dancers. Gond legend has it that this custom originated with the ancient hero Dandaria, who was the most prominent ancestor of the five-brother clan. Since customs like these involve social contact between the villages in an atmosphere of

festivity, they are a remarkable method of maintaining the solidarity of the tribe.

The Telangana area has a women's dance called the *Bath Kamma* which is based on an ancient legend. It tells the story of Saijanbai, the only child of a Rajput king, who was much pampered and did not learn the usual domestic duties. When her marriage was being arranged, the prospective in-laws took exception to her ignorance of household affairs. She was, therefore, forced to learn to do her various duties. The first one was to make cow-dung cakes. After she was married she failed to please her mother-in-law. Saijanbai refused to be corrected and scolded by her, so returned to her father's house where she spent the rest of her life. The *Bath Kamma* is usually performed with great feeling by newly married women.

The Siddis of Hyderabad have retained some of their African tribal dances which they perform during marriages and on other festive occasions. Siddis, a term applied loosely to Africans domiciled outside

A dance of the Siddis of Hyderabad





Lambadi dance, Hyderabad

their own country, were brought to India as warriors by the Bahamani kings, and have in the course of time been absorbed into the social life of the Deccan. Their dances depict the tribal warfare of their homeland in all its ferocity. Armed with shining swords and matchlocks and dressed in their exotic primitive costumes they dance with vigour and force.

When the Moharrum procession is taken out, the Muslims of Tanjore perform a realistic tiger and peacock dance with appropriate costumes and make-up.

Young women in Kerala and Tamilnad perform the *Kolattam*, or the stick dance, on festive occasions or to amuse themselves. The *Kummi* is also a women's dance prevalent in Kerala and other

parts of the South. The dancers move in a circle and the hand gestures signify reaping and harvesting. One of the women leads the singing with a favourite song while the rest take up the refrain. Each performer sings a new line in turn and the dancing stops when they all get tired.

Kerala's *Mohini Attam* is a beautiful dance based on the legend of Mohini, the temptress, who was Lord Vishnu in disguise. The Malayalis have a large number of vigorous dances. Some remarkable wrestling dances are found among the Pulayans, the lowest caste among the Hindus.

The *Yakshangana* and *Ottamtullal*, the source of the *Kathakali*, still survive.

The *Kathakali* has now developed into a highly technical classical art, but it is interesting to watch its earlier and cruder folk forms.

The *Yakshagana* is performed in Karnatak and is the perfect example of a simple dance-drama designed for rural entertainment. It is performed in the open air, generally after the summer harvesting is over. The performers dress much as the *Kathakali* dancers do but the make-up is far less complicated. There are only two types of role, namely, the *saumya* (gentle) and the *raudra* (fierce) instead of the four in the *Kathakali*. The themes are derived from the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. The dancers sing

their own lines, either in interludes, or at the close of the main scene.

The *Ottamtullal* is known in Kerala as the "poor man's *Kathakali*". It is a less elaborate and more abbreviated art form than its progenitor. It literally means 'running and jumping', and is performed by a single dancer in the *Kathakali* costume. The solitary performer acts and sings a whole play all by himself, with only a drummer and a bell ringer to accompany him. The dance was created about 150 years ago by Kanchan Nambiar who was piqued at his exclusion from a performance at the princely court. To avenge himself he began to perform to the common people



A devil dance from Kerala



Kathakali

on public streets. His biting but spontaneous humour and the effective crit-

icism of the Brahmanical priests and the feudal aristocracy won him a place in the hearts of the people and his art became more and more popular. Since a performance of the *Ottamtullal* is less expensive than that of the *Kathakali*, it is much more accessible to the people. However, this form of dancing does not have many exponents since acting, singing and dancing are all left to one person, which is far too exacting a technique.

The *Kuravanji* is a folk dance from Tamilnad and is the true ancestor of the classical *Bharat Natyam*. The traditional performers of this dance are Kuratis who belong to a nomadic tribe from the hilly regions and earn their living by telling fortunes. The dancers are pretty girls who wander all over the countryside and are willing to dance and read fortunes for anyone who will pay them a small sum. The dance technique is much simpler than that of the *Bharat Natyam*, but a performance of the *Kuravanji* is, nevertheless, very pleasing to the eye. Modern artists have created and performed a number of *Kuravanji* ballets in Madras. This trend is indicative of the living nature of this folk dance.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing pages, it is hoped, will have convinced the reader that our folk dances are a vital part of our national culture, and must be preserved and encouraged in order to make the present joyous and the future secure.

It is indeed a sign of the times that after centuries of neglect and oblivion India's folk dances are now being restored to their rightful place in our cultural life. The credit for this revival goes both to the enthusiastic pioneers who have worked selflessly in the cause of folk culture and to India's National Government. The Indian Folk Dance Festival, organised by the latter, has now become an annual feature of the Republic Day celebrations in the capital. The wide popularity of these festivals is partly a measure of public enthusiasm but largely of the joy of rediscovery of a forgotten tradition.

What of the significance of this revived interest in folk dancing? Obviously it

will enrich our cultural life by its beauty, spontaneity, and strength. Besides the stimulus they have given to the common people to express themselves, the folk dances have also proved their utility in the development of the mind and body of the country's youth. Certain folk dances have once more become a part of training in physical culture. Dances such as the *Lezim*, the *Phungadi* and the *Garba* have thus been incorporated into the syllabuses of a large number of boys' and girls' schools in the country.

By taking pride in their folk dancing, the people are beginning to be aware of new values and of the richness of their own cultural heritage. They have found a renewed sense of dignity and unlimited scope for their creative spirit. This in turn has instilled in them respect for people from other regions in the country, thereby strengthening the bonds of cultural unity which have always sustained the Indian people.

